

Minimum Wage and Our Values

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By Masked Crusader

In denouncing the opposition parties as populist for espousing a pro minimum wage position, Grace Fu, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, is **quoted** as saying.

"Our policies work. They may not be the most popular, but they are the best policies for us.

They're built on core values like meritocracy, multiracialism, self-reliance and honesty that have served Singapore well."

It is interesting that Fu would bring up the issue of values whilst speaking against minimum wage.

She bandies about these values as if Singapore is unique in having such a guiding ethos. Perhaps she had North Korea in mind when giving her speech because these virtues are in fact upheld with even greater zeal in the West than in Singapore.

Fu should know that it is dictatorial regimes in the East, such as Singapore, which subvert the meaning of values such as meritocracy, self-reliance, and honesty to achieve its own ends. *Meritocracy* in Singapore is used to institutionalise discrimination and marginalise those who do not conform to the Government's notions of success.

Fu lacks both the gravitas and the moral authority to extol these principles. Following the cut in ministerial salaries in 2012, which still left her among the highest paid politicians in the world, she said in a Facebook post:

"When I made the decision to join politics in 2006, pay was not a key factor. Loss of privacy, public scrutiny on myself and my family and loss of personal time were.

The disruption to my career was also an important consideration. I had some ground to believe that my family would not suffer a drastic change in the standard of living even though I experienced a drop in my income. So it is with this recent pay cut. If the balance is tilted further in the future, it will make it harder for any one considering political office."

Fu was roundly criticised for her post in which she did not elaborate on what it is her family could no longer afford when she left her job to become a Minister. She did not apologise. Instead she **responded** her post "could have been misunderstood" putting the blame squarely on the readers for misinterpreting her true intent.

Let there be no doubt that Fu's objections to minimum wage are nothing but politicking—exactly what she accuses the opposition of. When Fu mentions the Government's core values, she omits mention of *equality*, *empathy* and *dignity* which are equally important virtues, ones which shape the philosophy of minimum wage.

In 2013, Minister Lim Swee Say, in a debate on minimum wage in Parliament, **said**:

"With the WIS (Workfare Income Supplement), WTS (Workfare Training Support) and the progressive wage model, we believe we have now a minimum wage model—in

fact, it is more than a minimum wage model—whereby we can actually maximise the upside for the low-wage workers, and at the same time, minimise the downside.”

More than minimum wage?

If we have more than minimum wage in Singapore, why are groups clamouring for the lesser version?

Closer examination of the schemes—some say cons—makes it clear that the purpose of introducing a slew of targeted schemes is that it allows for continued exploitation of and discrimination against unskilled and semi-skilled foreign workers, who cannot vote in elections in Singapore, unlike disgruntled low-wage workers in Singapore, who can.

Discrimination based on nationality and ethnicity is institutionalised. During the **SMRT bus drivers' strike** in 2012, the crux of the issue was that bus drivers of different nationalities were not paid equally for equal work.

These targeted schemes also keep Singaporean low-wage workers dependent on the Government for scraps thrown their way. Rather than allowing workers to earn a wage which allows for a life of dignity, the Government prefers that they apply for handouts to get by.

For too long, Singapore's economic success has been built on the bedrock of exploited foreign labour. We have been fed the deceit that these workers are happy with the little they get here and that they can return to their countries rich. And, that these workers would be otherwise unemployed in their own countries. Most Singaporeans buy into it mostly because they profit from the exploitation or because it helps them sleep at night.

When the foreign worker levy was first introduced in Singapore in 1987, the rationale was that without it, Singaporeans would be uncompetitive against cheap foreign labour that could flood the job market. The levy therefore created a more level playing field and acted as a disincentive to hiring foreigners. Over time, as the money started pouring into its coffers, these reasons were conveniently forgotten and the Government continued to profit off the sweat of foreign workers.

If this revenue made by the Government is—as a citizen—my money, then I feel like a pimp.

It is an indictment against the PAP Government that it does not feel the same way. Fu's rhetoric about values rings hollow.

The Singapore Democratic Party, to their great credit, acknowledges that minimum wage if implemented would be universal. Once a minimum wage is determined, foreign workers who are currently earning salaries as low as \$300 a month would receive a huge pay hike. Yes, this can contribute to increase in costs but minimum wage cannot be introduced without other structural measures, some of which will mitigate cost of living. Examples: the removal of levies for jobs where there are no Singaporean takers, initiatives to reduce other business costs such as rent, tax tweaks, etc.

At higher salaries, we can also expect higher skilled, more professional workers from countries other than Bangladesh, China and Philippines to compete for the same jobs boosting workplace productivity.

Importantly, foreign workers will return to their countries at the end of their employment knowing Singaporeans treated them the same way Singaporeans themselves would want to be treated—something no foreign labourer is able to say currently.

The SDP should be lauded for not merely using the words *minimum wage* but for acknowledging that it will require an overhaul of labour and other laws as well as mindsets to make it work. If we achieve it, we can add to the desirable set of core values which Fu mentions, the values of equality, empathy, and dignified living—hallmarks of a first world nation.

Singaporeans should take this election period to contemplate whether the PAP reflects our values. Or if we, through years of indoctrination as, reflect theirs. Certainly my values are different from that of the PAP. Let us take together the difficult steps to unshackle our minds and feet and set a new direction for our future.

For more of my views on minimum wage, please see [*Minimum Wage, Politics and the Elephant in the Room*](#).

This article was first published at MaskedCrusader.blogspot.sg

[Victor Cheong](#) • [a day ago](#)

To the Author:

1. Rather than allowing workers to earn a wage which allows for a life of dignity

What do you mean by a wage which can allow for a life of dignity? What is your definition of a life of dignity? And thus, what wage are you expecting to allow people to live 'a life of dignity'?

2. And, that these workers would be otherwise unemployed in their own countries.

Do you have any theory or evidence to prove this? Just because they came to Singapore to work, does not necessarily mean that they would be unemployed in their own country. One reason may be that they realise the Singapore dollar is stronger than their own currency so if they work in Singapore and send money back to their families, the income will be more than if they were to stay to work in their home country.

[masked crusader](#) [Victor Cheong](#) • [19 hours ago](#)

Thanks Victor.

Minimum wage is something a panel of experts would determine based on what it thinks one would need to afford the basic necessities of life. This would be adjusted every few years. Cost of living and inflation among other factors are considered. The government decided, when it introduced its "progressive wage" that it would be \$1000 a month for cleaners and security personnel without offering any formula used to calculate the amount, making it rather arbitrary. This would make it seem other low-wage workers can get by on less than \$1000.

Minimum wage is expressed as an hourly wage, not monthly salary. In the 2012 SMRT bus drivers' dispute, drivers' monthly salaries were eventually increased but they were also required to work longer hours, meaning they were cheated by the tripartite partners into accepting a lower hourly salary in a take it or leave it offer.

On your second question, this excuse and others are what I have heard from people who say migrant workers here earn enough since they accepted the low wage when they signed their contracts. It reflects the mindset of those who have little understanding of migrant worker issues.